

THE VOICE OF THE SCARCE SWIFT *SCHOUTEDENAPUS MYOPTILUS* Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1962: 593) described the call of the Scarce Swift *Schoutedenapus (Apus) myoptilus* as "said to make a deliberate clicking noise". However, Williams (1967: 265) says "usually silent; call unrecorded", and McLachlan & Liversidge (1970: 263-4) do not mention any call. Brooke (1971) reviews geographical variation and distribution in the Scarce Swift, but makes no mention of vocalizations.

In fact this swift is frequently vocal and has a voice distinctly different from any other swift known to us, which is a great help in locating birds at a considerable distance, when their distinctive shape, size and colour may not be clear. Mackworth-Praed & Grant's comment is obviously based on Masterson & Child (1959) from eastern Rhodesia, and theirs is a good description. An even better one, but apparently overlooked, is by Dillingham (1958) from northern Tanzania. He describes the call as a metallic "tik" uttered three or four times, followed by a few short trills, some of which he considered to bear a resemblance to those of the Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicos fuscescens*.

R.J.D. first became acquainted with this call in 1969 on the Nyika Plateau in north-eastern Zambia (Dowsett 1970), and he has subsequently heard it there often - usually from birds flying in pairs over the forest canopy. On the Nyika in December 1977 we frequently observed pairs chasing and calling, even when they were part of a larger group of Scarce Swifts. Incidentally, the species belies its English name, and is very much more common in north-eastern Zambia and adjacent Malawi than Benson *et al.* (1971) and Benson & Benson (1977) infer. Whereas there were previously no records between northern Tanzania (Kilimanjaro and Oldeani) and southern Malawi (Mlanji), according to White (1965: 212), in addition to records for most months from the Nyika it is now known from the Mafinga Mountains (Dowsett & Stjernstedt 1973). Doubtless it also occurs in highland areas in southern Tanzania, but has been overlooked.

During a visit to Kenya in December 1976 we saw and heard Scarce Swifts on Mt Kenya and at nearby Naro Moru. Over the Mt Kenya forests they were in small mono-specific groups, but near Naro Moru they formed part of a large concourse of swifts of several species feeding low over open grassland - a habit also described for Scarce Swifts in Tanzania (Dillingham 1958), eastern Zaïre (Prigogine 1966) and elsewhere.

On 5 December 1976 F.D.-L. made a tape-recording of a pair of Scarce Swifts on Mt Kenya, and this is reproduced as a sonogram in Fig.1. This shows clearly a fast trill, followed by a harmonic nasal chittering. This sequence was followed by a few typical "tik"s (which may either precede or follow the trills) which are not reproduced in the sonogram.

It might be thought that the apparently unique voice of this montane swift provides further evidence of its generic distinctness from the *Apus* swifts. However, there is quite a wide variation in the vocalizations within that large genus. The voice of the Little Swift *A. affinis*, for example, is very distinct from that of the European Swift *A. apus*, and so we would not suggest at this stage of our knowledge that the voice of the Scarce Swift has any special taxonomic significance.

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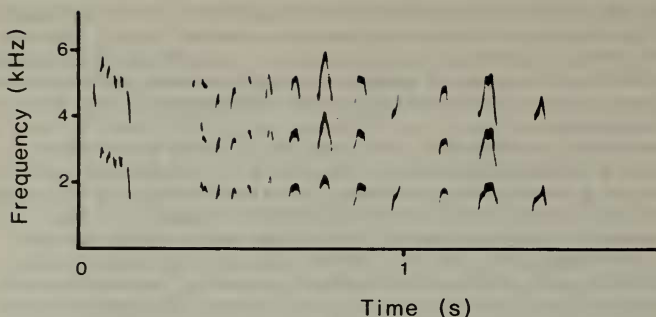


Fig. 1 Calls of Scarce Swift *Schoutedenapus myoptilus*: a short trill, followed by a nasal chittering (harmonics) and a high-pitched "tik"

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